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ABSTRACT

Before students can select words effectively for speaking, they must understand the value of word choice and the difference between written and spoken language. Once students appreciate effective word selection, they can label their own strengths and weaknesses in language and improve significantly by reading, listening, experimenting, and using a thesaurus. The importance of choosing specific, vivid, connotative language is easily illustrated by using comparison. Teachers can select various passages that are particularly well worded, and rewrite the passages in vague listless language. Students will quickly hear the difference. Next, the teacher can write a general statement on the board and direct the students to rewrite the sentence adding as many details as possible. Useful, too, is impressing upon students the enormous difference between their reading vocabularies and their speaking vocabularies. Students must also be able to give a name to language choices in order to be able to discuss, evaluate, and eventually make positive changes in their personal word choice. Students need practice using the labels for effective and ineffective language, first on a written speech (to give them time to make associations) then on a voiced speech. The desired result is for students to be able to label their weaknesses in language with specific terms, and then to be able to make changes. (A vocabulary for evaluating word choice and sample language style exercises are included.) (HOD)

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TEACHING LANGUAGE STYLE IMPROVEMENT

by

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for

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TEACHING LANGUAGE STYLE IMPROVEMENT

The American public school system offers most students little knowledge of the spoken language beyond what they learned in the first five years of life: how to communicate by imitation. Because teachers emphasize reading and writing, our students' observation of the language primarily involves the written word. Yet before students can select speaking words effectively they must understand the value of word choice, and the difference between the written and spoken language. Once students appreciate effective word selection, they can label their own strengths and weaknesses in language and improve significantly by reading, listening, experimenting, and using the thesarus.

THE VALUE OF EFFECTIVE WORD CHOICE IN SPOKEN LANGUAGE

The spoken language is less formal, more personal, and contains more:

- incomplete sentences
- contractions
- colloquialisms
- repetition (essential in spoken language)
- paraphrasing
- short sentences
- and simple sentence structure

By reading formal essays out loud and comparing the word choice to conversational style students can easily grasp the differences. The dissimilarities are important whether students speak extemporaneously, from a manuscript, or from memory. Students need to know that writing a speech in essay form and reading it to an audience won't work. Planning the content and verbalizing hap-hazzardly in "cafeteria language" won't work well either. Selecting effective words in a conversational style builds significant meaning into any message.

The importance of choosing specific, vivid, connotative language is easy to illustrate by using comparison. Select passages of various types (sentences, definitions, explanations, job interview answers, brief stories, jokes) which are particularly well worded, and rewrite the passages in vague listless language. Students will quickly hear the difference.

Next, let students practice building powerful sentences. Write a general statement on the board and direct students to rewrite the sentence adding as many details as possible. For instance, "Tom wrote a term paper last night," might become, "From seven until midnight, Tom hunched over his typewriter pecking away doggedly to complete his term project for English." When students share their creations with classmates, the entire class begins to see the endless range of interpretation permitted on vague language. Below is a sample.

Sample of Student Generated Sentences

Given Sentence:

"Sally took a bath."

Students add details to create:

"Sally lounged luxuriously in a lilac bubble bath."

"Sally soaked endlessly in frothy bubbles up to her chin."

"Sally eased slowly into the tub of warm water and moutains of bubbles."

"Sally stretched sensuously into the silky, steaming foam."

"Sally eased painfully into the tub of medicinal liquid."

"Sally slowly lowered her aching body into the rose scented bubbles."

"Following her doctor's prescription for a daily soaking, Sally plopped quickly into the tub of Epsom salts."

"Sally stepped gracefully into the tub as the water gushing from the faucet multiplied the soapy bubbles."

Useful, too, is impressing upon students the enormous difference between their reading vocabularies and their speaking vocabularies. Most speakers know so many nouns, adjectives, and verbs that could clarify and diversify their language, but all but the most meticulous speakers repeat the same two or three words to express an idea when they know probably twenty-five alternatives. I give students a list of synonyms, asking each to mark the words on that list she or he has used in conversation during the past two weeks. Below is one of those lists.

List of Synonyms for "happy" or "wonderful"

amused	exalted	humorous	satisfied
at ease	excellent	inspired	splendid
blissful	excited	in high spirits	superb
brilliant	fantastic	jovial	terrific
calm	fine	joyful	thrilled
cheerful	fit	jubilant	tremendous
comical	gay	magnificent	triumphant
contented	glad	majestic	turned on
delighted	glorious	marvelous	vivacious
ecstatic	good	overjoyed	witty
enchanted	great	proud	
enthusiastic	happy		

In addition, students learn by practicing avoiding cliches while fashioning new expressions, as in "The dog was ugly as a ....." or "I have _____ of homework tonight."

LEARNING A LANGUAGE FOR LANGUAGE

Appreciation of effective word choice is only the first step toward improving language style. Students must next give a name to language choices in order to be able to discuss, evaluate, and eventually make positive changes in their personal word choice. The list that follows reflects years of compilation, and I still occasionally find language weaknesses not explained by one of these terms.

A VOCABULARY FOR EVALUATING WORD CHOICE

Ineffective Language Style Elements

ABSTRACTIONS	words that represent objects of ideas that hold quite different meanings for different people. "honesty" "socialism" need precise definitions.
CLICHES	overused phrases that have lost power with over work: "worth its weight in gold" "cute as a button."
CRUTCHES	words and phrases used habitually do not add information to the message: "you know" "right?" "okay?" "and uh" "um" "and" between sentences (instead of a period).

DISCRIMINATORY SYMBOLS	words of phrases that stereotype according to race, ethnicity, age, sex, handicap, or religion: "The history of mankind..." "Indian giver" "...to Jew down the salesgirl.
JARGON	terms that aren't clear to the layperson without explanation: "significant implementation" "philosophy of standardization"
INAPPROPRIATE OWNERSHIP	using "you" and "your" with an object or action that doesn't belong to the audience: "you glide gracefully down the thirty degree slope, skiing skillfully around each mogul." (Only appropriate when all audience is skillful in skiing). Also excessive use of "you" and "your" even when ownership is appropriate become monotonous.
INAPPROPRIATE WORD CHOICE	using words incorrectly, usually as a substitution. "...and the teacher went, 'Sit down before I knock you down.'" (Using the verb to go in place of the verb to say).
INTENSIFIERS	adjectives and adverbs intended to strengthen words they modify can weaken them. "the real truth" "a severe crisis."
LISTLESS EXPRESSIONS	wordiness that doesn't add meaning: "The reason that he left our department was that he was not there alot because he spent a considerable time each week at home in bed resting his back and didn't get much work done."
NEEDLESS WORDS	same as above, but measured in single words. "in an angry manner" (angrily) "the question as to whether" (whether) "due to the fact that" (because).
NEGATIVE EXPRESSIONS	wording that is less forceful than positive statements. "She was not happy alot of the time." (She was unhappy) "I did not think to tell you" (I forgot to tell you).
OBSCENITY	language or expressions offensive to modesty or decency. Examples vary according to audience.
QUALIFIERS	words that limit the strength of other words: "it was a rather good movie" or "The trip was a kind of useful experience."
SLANG	certain coinages or expressions considered informal, nonstandard, or extended meaning terms. "cool" "where it's at" "right on."
REPETITION	reiterating the same word or idea excessively.
REDUNDANCY	expressing the identical idea twice. "I woke up at five a.m. this morning.
VAGUENESS	terms that aren't specific: "tall" (in comparison to what?) "interesting personality"

A VOCABULARY FOR EVALUATING WORD CHOICE

Elements of Effective Language Style

CLEAR WORDS:

precise	words with the exact meaning the speaker needs to convey; the following pairs do NOT mean the same: "inexpensive/cheap" "sly/dishonest"
specific	words that are not vague, that are definite and limiting: "1981 red corvette" instead of "car" or "condominium" instead of "house."
sensory	words that create feeling within the members of the audience: "the wafting odor of a Thanksgiving turkey cooking in the kitchen" or "burying your toes in warm sand"
loaded	words with emotional association: "WASP" "sleazy politician" (must be audience oriented)8
simple	words that are basic, uncomplicated and easy to understand as opposed to large, impressive words: "stomach ache" (instead of "gastroenteritis") and "marijuana" (instead of "cannabis sativae").

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE:

simile	specific comparison introduced by "like" or "as": "Tourists flocked around the Eiffel Tower like flies at a trash can."
metaphor	an implied comparison of dissimilar objects: "The fabric of the family in society is fraying at the edges."

EFFICIENT SYNTAX:

simple construction of sentences

active voice	"the jury returned a guilty sentence" (instead of "the verdict of guilty was returned by the jury.")

simple verb tense "she went" (instead of "she had gone")

periodic order	"After the verdict was returned, she went home." (instead of "She went home after the verdict was returned.")

variety in sentence construction

vary sentence length (use short and long sentences)

vary sentence type (use simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex)

vary sentence structure (use parallelism, alliteration, assonance)

Students need practice using the labels for effective and ineffective language, first on a written speech (to give them time to make associations) then on a voiced speech. Playing audio or video taped speeches enables replay, so students can hear elements they might have missed. The vocabulary on the lists is designed as a guide. My students are free to make up their own labels or alter mine; new terms must be descriptive, though, not "weak" or "poor."

Evaluating One's Own Word Choice

The desired result, of course, is for the student to be able to label her or his own weaknesses in language with specific terms, and then to be able to make changes. To facilitate this, each student needs to give an impromptu (or loosely prepared) speech which is recorded on audio tape. I audio tape students early in the semester while they deliver a "speaking exercise." I require three speaking exercises, two to three minutes long; I explain that they may compose the speech between the parking lot and the classroom, that the purpose is to get them used to "looking at all those pairs of eyeballs." I use subjects like "your pet peeve" or "illustrate some well known proverb." I don't announce that I will record; I lend each student a cassette tape, then reuse the tapes the next semester.

The homework assignment requires the student to transcribe his/her speech from the tape and label elements of effective and ineffective language. (Complete instructions and a sample exercise follow). They summarize their language style by listing all effective elements they did not find and all ineffective elements they did find in their speaking. Finally, they commit to what they intend to do to change their word use.

This exercise is the most astonishing revelation to most students. The impact is greater, in my experience, than their reactions when they first see their speeches on video tape. Students whom I've known for years will say, "Why didn't you tell me I talked that way?" I answer, "Because you wouldn't have believed me."

Instructions for Language Style Exercise

1. The student will transcribe her audio tape of an impromptu speech or speaking exercise. The student should write down all words (including "um", "you know" as well as throat clearing, mouth sucking noises, and "hmmm" sounds.) The transcription should be recorded in the left-hand two-thirds of a page (as illustrated in the sample), leaving the right-hand third of the page for the evaluation.

2. The speaker should label her word choice with both positive and negative terms from the list of EFFECTIVE and INEFFECTIVE ELEMENTS OF LANGUAGE STYLE. The speaker should identify most nouns and adjectives, as well as sentence structures and non-words using the terms given on the list and creating additional terms whenever possible spoken language the student can imagine.

3. The speaker should list after the transcription with labels:

   FIRSTLY, the elements of ineffective language she finds in her transcription;

   SECONDLY, the elements of effective language style she does not find in her transcription; and

   FINALLY, what methods she plans to use to improve her language style.

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Sample Language Style Exercise

Language Style Exercise
Speaking Exercise C

Sam Student
CM 127
Sept. 10, 19--

Transcription	Evaluation
Coupons can be a guy's very best friend. Shopping is really dull but you	discriminitory, qualifier, vague
can make a game out of it if you can really get into using coupons. It's	unclear pronoun, qualifier, slang, unclear pronoun
easy to find reasons for not using coupons, because it's time consuming,	
but I'm gonna show you um the short cuts to using coupons and the big	crutch
savings you can have. If you're gonna collect coupons you're more likely	
to do it if your scissors aren't in a different place from where you read	negative expression
the paper. Then you've gotta have a file system for the different types	imprecise description, vague
of coupons. You can buy card files for them but it's cheaper to make	unclear pronoun
your own. Once the coupons are, you know, organized according to types	crutch
(your laundry products, your frozen foods, etcetera) you need to make your	excessive use "you/your"
grocery list. You compare your coupons to your list and take with you	from here to end
when you go to the store all the coupons for things you need and mark	syntax (sentence order), vagueness
your grocery list in some way so you know you have a coupon for that item.	vague information
You can save up to 25 % on your grocery bill if you take the time to use	
coupons. Once you've set up the filing system and you have the method for	redundancy
sorting and storing, the process shouldn't take more than ½ hour a week.	
You can pocket the savings at the grocery counter, but you'll become a	
serious believer if you keep the savings in one place week after week.	
After a very few weeks, you and um a friend can have an evening on the	crutch
town with your cash register change.	

Ineffective language found:
- discriminitory terms
- qualifiers
- sland
- vagueness, unclear
- negative phrases
- crutches
- redundancy
- undear sentence order

Effective language not found:
- precise, specific words
- sensory, loaded words
- simile & metaphor

To improve my language style, I plan to: audio tape all speeches several times and listen to myself;
listen carefully for ineffective and effective language choice in other speakers and in conversations;
make a serious effort to choose my conversational words more carefully;
use the lists of synonyms, kkeping it on my car's front seat and trying to use a variety of words from the list.